The story of RICE INC.

RICE to RICHES
RICE, Inc., which stands for Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs, is a “non-governmental organization dedicated to... empower the indigenous people of the Cordillera to use their traditional knowledge and expertise to develop sustainable and culturally-appropriate economic enterprises.”

Founded in 2005, the idea for this organization started years before when Mary Hensley served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kalinga from 1976-1978. Seeing the people’s potential to create a sustainable business, Mary made a business plan and conducted a feasibility study in 2002 to help them “tap into their own rice.” Through Eighth Wonder, a socially responsible, shared-equity business founded by Mary, the processed rice is exported to the United States and sold as exotic, gourmet rice. The program’s components include partnership with local government units and agencies, recruitment and informational campaigns, production support and capacity building for farmers, and market development of the product.

“They were so overwhelmed,” Vicky says of how the local farmers reacted. Many still remember Mary from the years she spent in their village as a volunteer and were surprised that she had not forgotten them and had actually come back to help them once again. “Sometimes it takes an outsider to see what we have,” says Vicky on how Mary’s vision for the small villages in the Cordillera has grown into this monumental project.

Among the programs offered by RICE, Inc. are quality control seminars, and informing the farmers of the international standard of quality that is required of their produce. Likewise, training seminars are also conducted to develop local inspectors. The seminars, which make the farmers more knowledgeable about their product and elevate their skills, make the farmers prouder about their work and give them a sense of importance about what they do.

Aside from producing export-quality rice, RICE, Inc. was able to go beyond economics and tap into something even deeper – the community spirit that goes into planting and harvesting rice. By revitalizing the tradition of planting rice in the terraces, the organization has also enabled a revival of culture in the communities that they have touched. “Many younger generations are coming back to their provinces to help with their family’s rice planting and harvesting,” reports Vicky, adding that most were forced to migrate to the cities to look for work. She adds that now they are more interested in their own culture and in upholding the community’s traditions.

We are breaking ground,” says Vicky on what the organization has been doing – both literally and figuratively. In three short years, RICE, Inc. has accomplished much more than was initially expected. There has been a drastic increase in municipality participation in the program – starting with only two, the program now reaches 18 municipalities in Kalinga, Mountain Province and Ifugao, which translates to 1,358 farmers involved in the program. The organization has succeeded in forging a memorandum of agreement with the local government units of Ifugao-Kalinga. So far, Vicky has conducted over 7,000 training seminars. REGULAR VISITS TO THE RICE TERRACES.
300 meetings and seminars all over the region, producing 60 inspectors, with the aim of increasing that number to 90 after the training workshop scheduled from June to July this year.

From producing 869 kilos of rice in 2005, production in 2007 has jumped to 17,000 kilos, earning the farmers some P899,995. The market consists of 13 states in the US and interested buyers from the Netherlands, Italy, and Canada are already lining up to do business. The rice was also used as a gift at the UNESCO Conference in 2007.

Most of all, RICE, Inc.'s success has enabled farmers to go from subsistence farming to making it their source of livelihood. "We even had to teach some farmers how to count beyond 100 when their income started to increase," Vicky shares one poignant experience. Before, they were not even certain of what they would eat for the day, but now, Vicky says that "the farmers are able to plan for their future." Many have now been able to renovate their homes, receive much needed medical attention, start businesses, and send their children to school. Vicky reports one business-minded farmer who was able to buy a generator. He now rents it out to RICE, Inc. during the harvest season.

Anyone can become involved in RICE Inc. and the Cordillera farmers’ endeavor, says Vicky. One of the organization's newest programs, in partnership with UNESCO, is called Adopt-a-Terrace. An initial investment of P5,000 is enough to support the farming of a 300-square meter piece of land. Each sponsor will also be able to experience an immersion in harvesting and planting, if they choose to visit their sponsored farming families. The program is not a dole-out. Come harvest time, the sponsor may receive a percentage of the harvest earnings, or even some of the high-quality rice itself, depending on what terms they have decided with the farmers.

At the moment, rice produced through RICE, Inc. is exclusively for export. Vicky says that they have found that foreigners are willing to pay a higher price for the product. Penetrating the Philippine market is a greater challenge. Many Filipinos are concerned about paying the lowest possible price, especially when the product is local, she says. To address this issue, the organization is starting to use information campaigns to show that buyers should be willing to pay a fair price for high-quality local products.

RICE, Inc.'s efforts have been given a boost by the attention it has received after winning a P1-million grant from the Peace and Equity Foundation through the Panibagong Paraan, an event organized by the World Bank, where non-government organizations, civil society groups, academic institutions and other organizations are given the chance to showcase their work and vie for various grants.

With so much progress in only three years, one can only imagine how much more RICE, Inc. can accomplish. "We envision the further expansion of the project in the near future," says Vicky. "There will be an increase in production and an increase in the number of farmers going back to farming. We are committed to maintaining a globally-competitive product."

While final packaging is currently done in the
States, improvements and acquisition of equipment are ongoing so that all production can be done in the Philippines. Vicky adds that her dream for the farmers is that “every farmer will have a quality life,” with access to what were once luxuries like education and healthcare, to such basic necessities as electricity.

“What was impossible is now possible,” says Vicky proudly. When no one believed in the project, Vicky Garcia and Mary Hensley strived on, because they believed in the farmers of the Cordilleras, and they saw value in the rice of the uplands. Because of RICE, Inc., many farmers have become equipped with the knowledge they need to produce rice that meets international standards. Families are now able to support themselves through their own self-sustainable businesses.

The culture in the Cordilleras is flourishing. The iconic rice terraces are being revitalized and valued. “We have made them go back to dreaming again,” shares Vicky, highlighting how, ultimately, the organization’s success lies in sowing hope in each farmer.

RICE Inc.’s story is truly one of rice to riches – producing not only material wealth, but even more important, enriching the lives of each farmer.

For more information on RICE, Inc. and Eighth Wonder, e-mail contactus@heirloomrice.com or visit www.heirloomrice.com.

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